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ABSTRACT

Hypotheses explaining the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) score decline have been advanced in letters to the College Entrance Examination Board and to the Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline, in magazine articles, and in newspaper stories. A list of these hypotheses are presented and categorized according to changes in the schools, changes in society, changes in the population, and problems with the tests. The first major category (changes in the schools) is further broken down into hypotheses related to curriculum, institutional policies, teachers, and students. The second major category (changes in society) lists hypotheses related to family, religion, civil rights, crisis of values, national priorities, economic, labor movement in education, and technological changes. (Author/EVH)

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List of Hypotheses Advanced to Explain the SAT Score Decline

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This appendix is one of 27 that have been published individually to supplement On Further Examination: Report of the Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline. The report itself is available at $4 from College Board Publication Orders, Box 2815, Princeton, New Jersey 08540. Additional copies of this appendix, at $2 per copy, as well as a price list for all the appendixes, can be obtained from the same address. Payment must accompany any order not submitted on an institutional purchase order.

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In the course of the revelation of the score decline, a great number and variety of explanations were suggested. Some were triggered by the first publicity given to the decline nearly four years ago. Many more surfaced, however, as a direct result of newspaper stories that followed Mr. Marland's statement on the score decline in his report delivered at the 1975 Annual Business Meeting of the College Board, which included the announcement of the appointment of the Advisory Panel. While most have been in the form of letters to Mr. Wirtz or Mr. Marland, a number have also appeared in newspaper stories and magazine articles. Some have concentrated on one theme while others have ranged across a number of theories.

In order to give the Panel some feel for the many types of explanations that have been offered, a listing is attached in a format or framework designed to group them in a meaningful way. The task of organizing the material has been complicated by problems of interrelatedness and overlap among many of the explanations offered. Efforts to accommodate subtle differences in perspective and emphasis among individual observers have led in some instances to the multiple listing of an item. Wherever possible the phrasing of the explanation has been taken from the original submission or source.

CHANGES IN THE SCHOOLS

E-I. Curriculum

1. neglect of the three Rs (educational innovation at the expense of basic skills)
2. increased emphasis on aural-oral communication skills (use of audio-visual equipment)
3. decreased emphasis on reading and writing skills
4. effects of "new math"
5. decline in modern foreign language study (Source: Modern Language Association)
6. decreased enrollments in traditional, basic academic courses (Source: Wiley report)
7. reading programs that do not emphasize phonetics, vowels, consonants, etc.
8. inferior textbooks (publishers' concern with form rather than content. Sources: newspaper article; Hudson Institute report)
9. stress on independent study
10. open classrooms (where students choose activities in non-graded groups and work with little teacher interference)
11. education as entertainment concept (widening variety of nonchallenging, nonacademic courses that entertain more than they educate. Sources: newspaper articles; U.S. News & World Report article)
12. different curriculums followed by different ethnic groups (black students in one California district are enrolled in algebra and geometry courses at half the rate of white students in the same district. Source: letter from provost, University of California at San Diego)

E-II. Institutional Policies

1. automatic promotion of students (whether or not they have mastered course content)
2. reduced emphasis on grades
3. failure to separate students into fast/slow classes on the basis of their abilities
4. less homework
5. growth in school size (children benefit from smaller, more personal neighborhood schools. Source: letter from parent)
6. "edifice complex" with regard to school facilities (delusion that better schools require shinier physical plants, grander stadiums, fancier equipment, ever more sophisticated computers, laboratories and machines. Source: Rep. Jim Wright of Texas)
7. system of thousands of independent school boards that makes it impossible to set or demand national achievement standards. Source: letter from teacher)
8. increased retention in high school (more low-achieving students now continue schooling until graduation, with a resultant dilution of the educational experience for all. Source: Wiley report)

E-III. Teachers

1. fewer contact hours between pupils/teachers (encroachment of labor movement on teaching profession)
2. greater reliance on clerical aides
3. employment of inexperienced teachers in the K-6 grades (because of low school budgets. Source: letter from parent)
4. decline in the educational quality of teachers (poorly educated teachers whose own low level of academic achievement adversely affects their students' performance. Sources: newspaper article; letter from teacher; Hudson Institute report; letter from H. Rouse. See also Family, I.7)
5. egalitarian teachers and supervisors (who are willing or unable to enforce academic standards)
6. influence of the "soft pedagogical left" (which believes expressiveness is an adequate substitute for thinking and knowing and which views leniency as a kindness to the underprivileged. Source: Dean, Livingston College)
7. more married female teachers (who have more distractions, less dedication to teaching than older, single women. Source: letter from parent)
8. influx of male teachers and principals in the 1960s into traditionally female domain (with a concomitant relaxation in school discipline. Source: letter from former teacher)

E-IV. Students

1. decreased motivation of the test taker in an era of decreasing competition for college admission
2. negative attitudes toward education (rejection of traditional academic courses as not relevant)

3. decline in competitiveness
4. decreased test taking among abler students (talent and ability of brighter students being channeled into nontraditional, nonmeasurable activities)
5. truancy (increasing numbers of students are being absent from school, thereby decreasing the average amount of schooling per pupil and further burdening the teaching process. Sources: newspaper article; Wiley report)
6. undisciplined students (discipline problems have occupied teachers with keeping order in the classrooms and left less time for instruction. Sources: letters from parents; newspaper article)
7. alcohol and drug problems (Wiley report)
8. alarming increase in youth crime (Wiley report)

CHANGES IN SOCIETY

S-I. Family

1. permissiveness, abdication of parental role (parents' refusal to make selves final authority on good/bad, right/wrong)
2. parental coddling, indulgence (parents and teachers who seek to absolve children from difficult or unpleasant tasks)
3. women's liberation:
   a) more working mothers
   b) fewer women willing to be "professional mothers" (with the result that nutritional needs of children not being met at home; guidance, supervision of children increasingly shifted to schools and other outside agencies)
4. higher divorce rate (more single-parent families)
5. changes in expectations for education (upward and downward social mobility)
6. effects of family configurations on intellectual achievement (mean birth rank over years appears to correlate with SAT scores. Source: Zajonc)
7. "baby-boom" phenomenon (impact of the postwar baby boom on school enrollments; pupils who have been earning lower scores on the SAT may be those who received most of their education in schools affected by rapidly increasing enrollments. Source: letter from H. Rouse. See also Teachers, III.4)

S-II. Religion

1. growing rejection of traditional Western religions and concomitant search for meaning and relevance in other areas (religions of the East, drug-related religions, mysticism, witchcraft, astrology)
2. preference for fantasy over reality (celebration of the "ideology of irrationalism" in which knowledge is attained through "intuition, inspiration and revelation." Source: L. Trilling)

S-III. Civil Rights

1. increased encroachment of the courts, including busing and other efforts to increase minority integration (with resultant upheaval in secondary school programs and attendance)
2. increasing legislative involvement in education (legislatures have tied the hands of school personnel with respect to discipline. Source: newspaper article; letter from parent)
3. women's liberation (cf. Family)
4. greater access to higher education (the more accessible a college education, the less are high school students motivated to do well)

S-IV. Crisis of Values

1. impact of the counterculture (with its hostility to reason, to science, to technology, to industry, to the work ethic)
2. revolution in values, including a decline in the Protestant ethic (in an advanced, technically proficient democracy, the idea of success, in a certain sense, the idea of work itself, is growing obsolete)
3. subversive political activity (activity of Communists and organized crime in promoting pornography; the "grabbing of political power by the NAACP, NEA, CLU, and others. . .[so that] public school children are misguided through negative education. . .The intention is to groom them in total disgust with the nation, family, and self." Source: letter from parent)
4. rise of egalitarianism (See also National Priorities, below)

S-V. National Priorities

1. national commitment to widespread diffusion of learning (with its tendency to bring education down to lowest common denominator)
2. Viet Nam War (its end has reduced motivation for college attendance to avoid draft)
3. reduced international commitment (less emphasis on foreign language instruction)
4. use of schools to correct social ills of nation (related to Civil Rights, which see)
5. open admissions (related to Civil Rights, which see)

S-VI. Economic

1. taxpayer rebellion (resulting in tighter school budgets)
2. employment situation (which has eroded the certainty that a college education will necessarily lead to a job)
3. rising college costs (may have discouraged some superior students from applying to expensive schools that require higher SAT scores)
4. open admissions to college (in part as a result of over-expansion in higher education)

S-VII. Labor Movement in Education

1. collective bargaining agreements (which may result in teacher contracts protecting the incompetent and limiting the creativity of teachers)

S-VIII. Technological Changes

1. impact of television:
   a) less time spent in reading, conversation
   b) children's auditory skills honed at expense of visual
   c) daytime school effort erased, overwhelmed by after school television viewing (with its silliness, violence)
   d) television viewing makes it more difficult for children to relate to the printed word
2. increased use of other electronic communication
3. decline in the importance of the printed media (except flip charts)
4. information glut
5. health-related considerations:
   a) increased use of chemical additives in foods
   b) side effects of tranquilizers and other drugs
   c) effects of anesthesia used in childbirth

CHANGES IN THE POPULATION

1. more educationally disadvantaged
2. fewer able students going directly to college
3. decline in repeaters
4. repeaters today less able
5. pool of talented students being shared with ACT
6. migration of more capable females to the technologies
7. post-World War II baby population unusual in a number of respects (family size, structure, SES)

PROBLEMS WITH THE TESTS

1. scaling and equating
2. lack of "linguistic clarity"
3. no longer relevant to what is being taught
4. cultural bias